

PS

2377

M87Z1





Class PS2377

Book M87Z7

# Mary Elizabeth Mears: "Nelly Wildwood"

By Publius V. Lawson



The State Historical Society of Wisconsin  
Separate No. 176  
From the Proceedings of the Society for 1916



# Mary Elizabeth Mears: "Nelly Wildwood"

By Publius V. Lawson



The State Historical Society of Wisconsin  
Separate No. 176  
From the Proceedings of the Society for 1916

## Mary Elizabeth Mears: "Nellie Wildwood"

By Publius V. Lawson

Several years ago I was selected by C. F. Cooper & Company of Chicago as editor in chief of a history of Fond du Lac County, and had commenced to gather material when other fields attracted the attention of the publishers and the work was abandoned. For that work Miss Mary Mears had furnished the recollections of her mother, Mary Elizabeth Mears, given below, written by Mrs. Mears in her seventy-second year as a remembrance to her family of three talented girls. During her long life she had written a great number of poems and prose articles, which were published in the press of the State and elsewhere under the nom de plume, Nellie Wildwood. When she gave up housekeeping in Oshkosh she divided the clippings she had saved into three bundles and gave them into the keeping of her three daughters.

In his article on "Early Wisconsin Imprints"<sup>1</sup> Henry E. Legler says: "The first Wisconsin book of verse was published at Fond du Lac in 1860. It was a pamphlet of 57

<sup>1</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 1903, 121. An earlier book of verse by a Wisconsin author is Elbert Herring Smith's *Makataimeshekiakiak; or Black Hawk, and Scenes in the West. A National Poem in Six Cantos*. The copy of this work in the Wisconsin Historical library was published at New York in 1848, and there is nothing to indicate that this is not the first edition. According to the recollections of Henry W. Bleyer, veteran Milwaukee journalist, however, the book was first printed serially in Milwaukee, the author's home. If Mr. Bleyer's recollection is correct Smith's work antedates that of Mrs. Mears as the first Wisconsin book of verse by at least a dozen years.

PS 2377  
M87 Z7



## Mary Elizabeth Mears: "Nellie Wildwood"

pages, by Mrs. Elizabeth Farnsworth Mears. The title was as follows: *Voyage of Pere Marquette, and Romance of Charles de Langlade, or, the Indian Queen, An Historical Poem of the 17th and 18th Centuries.*

Mary Elizabeth Farnsworth was born in Groton, Massachusetts, in 1830. She married John H. Mears, and died at the age of seventy-seven, in November, 1907, at the home of her daughter, Louise M. Fargo of Lake Mills, Wisconsin, and was buried in Riverside Cemetery at Oshkosh. Her married life was mostly passed in Oshkosh where all her children were born and passed their childhood and youth. In December, 1908 I received from Mary Mears the following concerning her mother:

I am sending you what details I can about the life of our mother.

The genealogy of the Farnsworth Family which I enclose<sup>1</sup> may prove of some assistance, and the paper entitled "Recollections" was written by my mother in her seventy-second year. It is a quaint account of her childhood, the crossing of the country in those early days, and the final settling of the family in Wisconsin. While it gives briefly the story of her life in the bosom of her family, it tells nothing of her later experiences as a writer. From the examples of her writing which we have in our possession she appears eager, ambitious, and gifted to an unusual degree. Her play of "Black Hawk" which had a run of three weeks in Madison, is really remarkable in that it is truly dramatic and the characters essentially picturesque. She was the author of many fugitive poems and stories which appear in editions of the early newspapers of Wisconsin. But she is best known as the author of the play just mentioned and of the long poem, *Voyage of Pere Marquette, and Romance of Charles de Langlade, or the Indian Queen.* This poem is connected with the early history of Wisconsin, and quite aside from its literary merit, is really valuable as an historical record. I remember often hearing her relate how extensive was her study of all the legends and history connected with the subjects she chose, before she wrote the poem. Had I no other evidence of her gift than these chance clippings which I have in my possession, I would have no hesitation in saying of

---

<sup>1</sup> We omit to publish the genealogical sketch referred to, since it may be found in much fuller detail in Moses F. Farnsworth (compiler), *Farnsworth Memorial, Being a Record of Matthias Farnsworth and His Descendants in America* (Manti, Utah, 1897).

## Wisconsin Historical Society

her work that it is picturesque, fresh, and often exceedingly quaint. She had the great gift of enthusiasm and her poem written at the time when the Atlantic cable was first laid and the first message received by the new land from the old—is a cry of supreme exultation. I have not this poem in my possession—if I had it, I would send it to you. The faults of my mother's writing are those of the period, but this very sentimentality adds to the quaintness of her work now. She was well known throughout the State and many poems were addressed to her. The well known song, popular in bye gone days, "When the birds shall return, Nelly Wildwood," was written to her. I should take pleasure in furnishing you with an early picture of my mother and also a photograph of a bas-relief portrait of her which my sister, Helen Farnsworth Mears, the sculptor, has just completed. It was finished the year of her death, and shows her just as she was in these later years. The eager intelligence and grace of the young portrait of her is even intensified in her old age. Age came to her but it only rendered her more lovely. She has been called "a vanishing type."

I have written you thus frankly of my mother, striving to give you those details of her career and the attributes of her personality which seem to me most necessary for record. Out of this mass of material, I hope you may find what you need for your work.

A brief sketch of the activities of the members of her family will not be out of place here.

Louise M. Mears was married to Frank B. Fargo of Lake Mills, Wisconsin. Before her marriage she illustrated a number of books, the most notable of which was *The Land of Nod*, by Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

Helen Farnsworth Mears was born and passed her youth at Oshkosh, and obtained her education in the same city. Her first important work in her chosen profession of sculpture was the plaster-cast model of the "Genius of Wisconsin" for the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1892, for which she was given the \$500 prize offered by the Wisconsin women's clubs for the best piece of art exhibited at the Fair by a Wisconsin woman. This model was afterward cut in marble, and it stood in the rotunda of the old capitol at Madison for many years, and now stands in the main corridor of the new capitol.



VOYAGE OF PERE MARQUETTE,  
AND  
Romance of Charles De Langlade,  
OR,  
THE INDIAN QUEEN.

AN HISTORICAL POEM OF THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES.

BY NELLIE WILDWOOD.

( Mrs. Eliz. Farnsworth Mears. )

FOND DU LAC:

WRITTEN AND PUBLISHED EXPRESSLY FOR HARRISON & STEVENSON'S ART UNION.

1880.

TITLE-PAGE OF MRS. MEARS'S FIRST BOOK OF VERSE



## Mary Elizabeth Mears: "Nellie Wildwood"

Congress gave Miss Mears the commission for the statue of Frances E. Willard which stands in the hall of fame in the national capitol. It is the only representative of womankind among so many celebrated men, and a statue of a woman by a woman, both of whom passed all their childhood and obtained their education in our State.<sup>1</sup> Miss Mears designed the bust of George Rogers Clark, presented to the public library of Milwaukee by the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution. For the St. Louis Exposition she designed the legendary study of life, an ideal subject, a large bas-relief wall fountain fourteen feet high, which was given a conspicuous place and awarded a medal.

Miss Mears studied with Lorado Taft in Chicago, then in the art schools of New York and ateliers of Paris and Rome. For several years she was a student and assistant to Augustus Saint Gaudens. In Paris she won several medals, exhibited in the salon, and worked in the private atelier of Saint Gaudens, who was then executing some commissions abroad. In 1898 she established her studio in New York where she died, February 17, 1916.

Mary Mears has devoted her talents and activities to writing fiction. She wrote a short review of her work in a letter to Belle Blend, then with the Milwaukee *Sentinel*, which was published in that journal, July 28, 1907, as follows:

I was expected to write and I wrote, principally, I think in the first place, because my mother before me had written. My parents considered that I had a picturesque and original way of using words, and when I was a little girl, I was set at story writing as my sister, Helen,

---

<sup>1</sup> This statue was authorized by Congress in 1898. The commission was given to Helen Farnsworth Mears, who designed the statue from a number of photographs. It was unveiled in February, 1905. A full-page half tone of the statue, accompanied by a brief historical sketch, is published in *Harper's Weekly*, Feb. 25, 1905.

## Wisconsin Historical Society

was set at modeling, as our elder sister, Louise, was set at drawing. Our elder sister illustrated books while still young. Helen modeled a bust while she was still a child in short dresses, and I wrote all but the five concluding chapters of my first book, "Emma Lou—Her Book," between the ages of 13 and 17, while I was still a schoolgirl. Later when the book was published by Henry Holt, I added, at their suggestion, the last five chapters which make it a love story.

During the progress of "Emma Lou" I wrote many short tales. I wrote for a sensational paper in Chicago that paid me, as I remember, about \$4.00 for a newspaper page of the finest print. My stories were as sensational as the imagination of seventeen years could produce. I remember one was called "His Strange Eyes"—it closed with the hero's leaping from a housetop into the darkness of night. My first short story to meet with marked success was published in *Harper's Bazaar*. Afterwards I published it in the leading magazines. My best short story appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1900. It is entitled "Across the Bridges." It was written immediately after my return from Europe.

The achievement that marked my efforts was at times easy, and at other times difficult. My first book, "Emma Lou," I wrote with no conscious effort, as a child plays. The short stories were more difficult, for I sought constantly to use the fewest words possible in telling the tales. It seems to me now that I put very little of myself into them. They are, with the exception of two or three, objective studies. "The Breath of the Runners," I believe, is the most individual work I have done, therefore I consider it a greater achievement than anything else.

### RECOLLECTIONS OF MARY ELIZABETH MEARS

(Written in 1903)

My earliest recollections are of going to school, held firmly by the hand. I was in charge of the teacher and to reach the red schoolhouse we had to climb a high hill. The teacher's little nephew was on her other side. He was a few months older than I, but we were both babies, being less than three years old. My only recollection of that time is of this little boy's being allowed to escort me home one day, the few rods beyond where the teacher lived. Our house was fenced from the road and had a ditch drain



## Recollections of Mary Elizabeth Mears

skirting the road. Before the gate was a bridge. For some reason we thought it would be best to cut across lots and climb the fence to reach our house. I essayed, with my small escort's help, to cross the ditch, which was then full of water. Into this water I fell, flat on my back, and being very fat I "stuck." The wails we both set up brought my frightened mother to the rescue. Never shall I forget the awful sensations of that disaster.

I know I must always have gone to Sunday school, for my parents were strict churchgoers, but my first impression of what life really meant and of its responsibilities and duties came one day when my father had gone to a funeral. We children were playing in an old barn or woodshed, where there was a large carpenter's workbench under which the floor was of smooth, black earth. We were engaged in driving all the nails we could find in patterns into this soft earth. We none of us had a doubt that this disposition of the nails was all right but suddenly a man on horseback darkened the door and seeing what we were doing began chiding us severely on the enormity of our offense. He was a perfect stranger to anybody belonging to us, and had merely come to see our father on business. Nevertheless we listened to him with all our ears, and fear gradually filled our young hearts. He spoke of our awful sinfulness generally, of the dire necessity of our always being good or God would heap woeful penalties upon our heads. Finally he pictured graphically the fire and brimstone which would be our element in the future state. He seemed on his black horse like some terrifying messenger of warning. I was thrown into childish hysterics, which my mother, when she returned, was long in comforting. I know she had to take me into her bed that night and it was very late when my sobs ceased, and even after sleep came I could not forget. Nor have I forgotten now.



## Wisconsin Historical Society

From my second until shortly after my sixth birthday the red schoolhouse (schoolhouse number two it was called) was a mecca to me. I believe I studied well and learned easily for I received a card when I was two and a half years old, testifying to the fact that I had learned my alphabet at that age. Before my seventh birthday my father concluded to sell the old homestead, which had been left him by his father, Sampson Farnsworth. I remember hearing that this grandfather of mine had married my grandmother in his latter years, being at the time the father of a large family of children, but my father, Matthias, was the only child of this second marriage. Certain things come back to me vaguely, but young as I was, I appreciated that we were leaving the place connected closely with our blood for generations past, and I remember distinctly how wrought up was my childish mind, when with two brothers and a sister older than myself and our father and mother and also a young man who was going west with us to share our fortunes, we took the stage at the old door. I was the only one of the family ever destined to see the place again with its wide granite doorstone and the enormous willow waving its graceful branches to us as if in farewell.

From Groton with its low peaceful hills, its old Inn and its church spires, from Groton where slept so many of our name, we went to Boston or to Providence where we took the cars for a few hours, but here my memory fails. The only impression left upon my mind is one of strangeness. The next that I remember was our being on a boat—a canal boat which was attached to a pair of horses by long cables. The horses were driven along the bank by a man who went beside them on foot, and dragged the boat with its load of passengers, at no very great speed, as may be imagined. I remember we used often to

## Recollections of Mary Elizabeth Mears

go on shore for various reasons, but always on our return we found our boat-home no farther away than an easy walk. Indeed, I seem to remember that there was much talk of a "break" on the canal, and that we were days and days too long in reaching our destination. But, by devious ways, I distinctly remember our arriving at the city of Detroit, where my mother, worn out with the adventure, declared that she was tired of the ways of locomotion we had tried so far, so my father decided on purchasing a team of horses and an emigrant wagon large enough to contain not only ourselves but our goods and chattels.

How we children enjoyed those days of travel through a virgin country and untrodden forests where now and then a little clearing with a log cabin appeared: These were the homes of people who had preceded us from the eastern states. We stopped where night overtook us, sometimes traveling hours over corduroy roads, which were made by the cut trees which lay in lines just as they fell, in order to reach the cabin of a settler before night. These settlers always generously shared with us what they had, and how we children enjoyed the warm greetings of the lonely families, the ample suppers, the babble and confusion attendant upon our arrival. Our mothers talked rapidly together as if they were lifelong friends, and we children at once became acquainted with the boys and girls in these wayside cabins. We must have carried a great many provisions with us, for there was always much private conversation, our mother taking the women of the house aside, and what we ate was always much the same as we had when by ourselves, and there were always dishes which we children especially liked as well as the small people of the other family.

Sometimes we stopped for a day or two. There was plenty of game in the forest or "oak openings" and as

## Wisconsin Historical Society

my father was an enthusiastic hunter, when he found a congenial spirit, it was easy to persuade him that we all needed rest. He was an ardent bee hunter also, and understood perfectly the habits of the busy creatures. One day, I remember, he noticed near the cabin where we were stopping that bees were humming around the door. It was second nature for him to watch them and he noticed them continually flying away and returning at very short intervals, always taking the same direction. He procured some sugar and, producing the anise-seed extract, a bottle of which he always carried in his pocket, he wet the sugar with it and carried it in the direction they went. He deposited it on a log or stump and lay down a little distance away. Soon it attracted the attention of the bees. They would crawl over it a few seconds, then fly off, and after they had gone he would carry it in the direction they had taken and again deposit it. They would return, again forsake it, and again he would follow as they led until very soon he located the "bee tree," for these intelligent little creatures store their honey in the hollow trunk of a decayed tree. This "bee tree," of course, he marked with the little hatchet the hunter always carries. Then he returned hastily to the cabin, to which he found his way readily as he had blazed his way as he went. He whispered something to the man of the house and they went out together. Now my father, when he saw the bees working at the flowers, had told his host what he expected to find, but he must go alone, he insisted, for a bee hunter must be very quiet on their trail. When, however, the tree was located, the man could be of assistance. And what rejoicings when we saw them returning with the treasure. Pans and pails were put in requisition to hold the well-filled comb which they had chopped the tree down to get, with great precautions



## Recollections of Mary Elizabeth Mears

against being stung. But even so many of the bees followed them, for these little creatures resent bitterly their domain being intruded upon and fight furiously to protect their hoarded sweets. So, as I say, many of them followed my father to the cabin, and loud screams from a little barefooted boy told that one blow had been struck by the fallen foe. It can scarcely be understood in these days what excitement and pleasure this find of honey brought to the lonely household; how pleased they were, for it was no easy thing getting delicacies then; they had to journey miles to get the necessary provisions, and then what care to make the stores last as long as possible!

The charm of this journey is still with me. The early start in the morning when the dew lay on the grass and the trees, the heartfelt goodbyes to the old-new friends, then the weary plodding of the horses under the midday sun, and, finally the gathering of the purple evenings when the air was sweet with bird calls, and when we slept either in the wagon in sound of the horses cropping grass, or, as has been related, in the home of some settler.

When we reached Chicago I remember that we were "sloughed," as it was termed, in the principal street. This was in 1837 and the fact has always been related with gusto by each member of the family, inasmuch as another team had to be hitched in front of our own to get us out of the deep mudhole into which we had sunk. From Chicago we continued to our destination which was Fox River, Illinois, a point equally distant (four miles) from what were the cities of St. Charles on one side and Elgin on the other.

Here my father bought a farm under very little cultivation, on which there was a log cabin with a high chimney built of sticks and filled up between with the mud of the

## Wisconsin Historical Society

country. And here began our life as pioneers—my mother, a delicately nurtured woman, unused to hardships and privations, and my father fresh from his small farm and orchard in the town of Groton, Massachusetts. What life meant to them can be imagined. Our first days in the log cabin are still fresh in my mind. It was built on a slope of ground on the bank of the wide, noble Fox River, known now the world over, and on the opposite bank was a dense forest coming almost to the waters' edge. Our house was over two miles from any human habitation. The nearest town was four miles distant, but no supplies, to any amount, could be obtained nearer than Chicago. Enough supplies for present use we had brought along, but we needed a cow at once. One had been heard of as for sale some four or five miles away. A man of whom we had stopped to inquire the way said that he had heard that a band of Indians were camping at "Cold Spring," which was on the farm quite near the cabin my father had bought. But as nothing was seen of them, after a day or two, the necessity of milk being great, it was decided that my father and this man should take the horses and start early in the morning and return in time for breakfast. Therefore, my mother kept it warm for them. I remember she was just stooping over the "bake kettle" (a wide fireplace took up one side of the cabin and held all the cooking possibilities) when suddenly the six-paned window was darkened and the face of an Indian squaw, which just fitted into the space where one pane was missing, looked in upon us. She gazed steadily, and my brother and myself gave one scream and threw ourselves upon our mother, almost pitching her into the fire. I suppose the face was instantly withdrawn, for we saw nothing of Indians that day. But we all huddled together in affright until my father and Andrew Hubbard



## Recollections of Mary Elizabeth Mears

returned, triumphantly leading the cow. After that we became acquainted with the Indians, who were very friendly, bringing up presents of wild game and borrowing my father's guns which they knew how to use, though most of the warriors carried bows and arrows, with which they were expert marksmen.

What wonderful possibilities those days held for a man who loved to bring down big game! I saw my father stand on the bank of the river and shoot a magnificent deer which had come down to the opposite bank to drink. He came swiftly with branching antlers held high, pushing his way among the trees, emerged on the narrow strip of sand and stooped to drink, when the fatal bullet laid his graceful form low. Never shall I forget the way he turned, ran fleetly with his head still up, then stumbled and fell dying. My agony was great and my father, indeed, shared it. He said he had not dreamed of hitting game at such a long distance, but the hunter's desire to try was too strong for him. So our days were filled with the excitement of the pioneer's life. There were the strange friendships with the Indians, the beads given me one day by an old squaw, the strange sight of seeing an Indian clothed only in a high hat, otherwise stark naked, riding like the wind on a horse through the forest—the things that made us laugh and that made us weep, the things that sometimes froze our blood with apprehension.

I recall one incident of the winter season that will always stand out in my mind as fraught with living terrors. The spring was approaching and my father was anxious to start his sugar camp as soon as possible. To do this he would enter the woods on the opposite bank, clear a space and set up his kettles over fires. There was much talk as to whether the sap had yet started in the maple trees, and finally one mild day my father with another

## Wisconsin Historical Society

man decided to cross the river and examine them. Before the house the river was a clear blue expanse quite free from ice. We had heard rumors that above us, at the bend, the ice was breaking up, but the sun shone so mildly, the river looked so innocent from our door, that my father decided to go across and make his investigation. He did so, taking a small boat. About eleven o'clock a man came running up to the house. He cried out his message: "No one must go across the river. The ice is piling up at the bend." Then he ran on. My mother immediately sent us children down to the banks, and in a few moments she joined us. Already the water in the river was overflowing the banks and the air was filled with the crashing, the grinding of mountains of ice. We stood there in agony and ever the noise grew more deafening and slowly, one by one, and they were not very large, pieces of ice began to appear. They came very swiftly, borne along by the hurrying current. Then it was we raised our voices all together: "The ice! The ice! You can't get across." My father and his companion could see us indistinctly. They knew from the sound that the ice was possibly breaking, but no messenger had warned them of immediate danger. They only thought, when they saw us on the bank, that something had happened to terrify the tiny group of mother and children. So, despite our entreaties, they took to the boat. In vain our calls, "The ice! The ice! You can't get across." The words were lost in that growing thunder of crashing ice. And they began to pole swiftly towards us with all their puny strength. Our agony, as we watched, passed all bounds. Never shall I forget the voice of the ice, the shaking of the bank, and more than all else, the look on my mother's face. Little and lone and defenseless, we all prayed as we stood, prayed as

## Recollections of Mary Elizabeth Mears

babies and women pray with all our hearts in the words, "Save them God, save them." And on and on came the little boat, so tiny, so puny in the midst of the wide river. Suddenly with a mighty crash as though the foundations of the universe were giving way, down came the ice— a piece which filled half the river. As if by a miracle it glided back of the boat, cutting off from the two men all possibility of retreat. Then they bent all their strength. The boat glided forward, an enormous piece of ice at that instant came down on our side of the river and for an instant lodged against the bank. Quick, quick the men crawled from the boat onto this piece of ice, they ran fleetly across it, and as they jumped onto the shore, the mighty ice block continued, thundering on its course. The boat was shattered before our eyes to a million bits. And we—we stood there and we knew that God was good.

We lived only a year or two on this farm. The pioneer life was too hard for my mother. The farm was sold and we moved to St. Charles, but we did not stay there long. The schools were poor, and my brothers were growing up. Racine was looked over but no business location suited, and Fond du Lac was finally settled upon as offering facilities for the manufacture of farm machinery. And in Fond du Lac we all lived until one by one the children married.



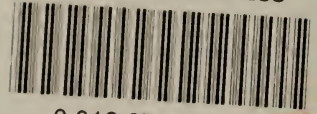








LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 012 074 831 2

